Degrowth: a remarkable renaissance

There is continuing widespread interest in debate on Degrowth. ecosocialist.scot is keen to encourage this debate. We published Michael Lowy's Nine Theses on Ecosocialist Degrowth recently, and below we are republishing two more topical contributions. The first is an overview of the Degrowth debate from Alan Thornett's Ecosocialist Discussion site and the second is an introduction to degrowth concepts from the Scotonomics newsletter that was also published by Scottish daily newspaper 'The National'.

Degrowth: a remarkable renaissance

This article was written for the current edition of the Green Left's publication Watermelon in advance of the Green Party conference AT

There has been an upsurge of interest in degrowth –a long-discussed strategic alternative to climate chaos and not just from the radical left. It is experiencing a renaissance at the moment, driven by the relentless rise in global temperatures and the resulting climate chaos.

It was the theme of a three-day conference in May entitled 'Beyond Growth 2023' which filled the main hall of the European Parliament with mostly young and enthusiastic people. It was organised by 20 left-leaning MEPs and it was opened by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

According to the Economist report the young audience 'whooped

and cheered' when it was proposed that some form of de-growth will be necessary to avoid societal collapse."

In July, Bill McKibben – the veteran environmental campaigner, founder of 350.org, and prolific author – had a major article in the New Yorker strongly advocating degrowth from an historical perspective.

Numerous books supporting degrowth – to varying degrees and stand points – have been also published recently from the left: The Case for Degrowth by Giorgos Kallis et al; Less is More how degrowth will save the world by Jason Hickel; Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism by Kohei Saito; and The Future is Degrowth by Matthias Schmelzer.

A recent book opposing degrowth is Climate Change as Class War, by Matt Huber – from, in my view, an ultra-left and voluntaristic position. He has reviewed himself in the current edition of Jacobin.

Growth is the driving force of the environmental crisis. Over the past 60 years the global economy has grown at an average rate of 3 per cent a year, which is completely unsustainable. John Bellamy Foster has pointed out that a 3% p.a. growth rate of would grow the world economy by a factor of 250 over the course of this century and the next. Over the same period the global human population has risen from 3.6 billion in 1970 to 8 billion in 2022.

Such growth rates are incompatible with the natural limits of the planet, and will ultimately defeat any attempts to resolve the environmental crisis that fail to deal with it.

An early attempt to analyse this issue was undertaken in 1970 by Donella Meadows and a team of radical young scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was published in 1972 as the Limits to Growth Report

The Meadows Report, as it became known reached the monumental

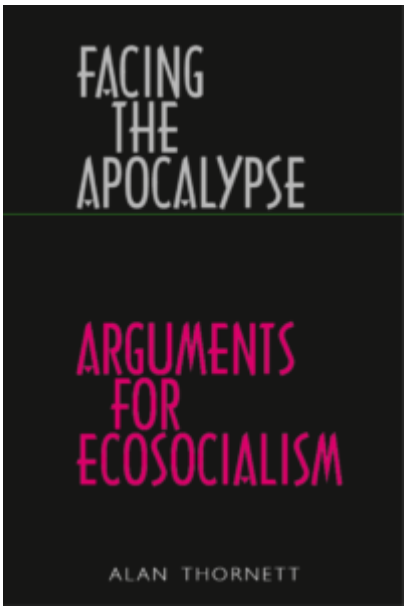
conclusion that: "if the present growth in world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continues unchanged", the limits to growth on the planet will be reached sometime around the middle of the 21st century. The most probable result "will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity."

It sold 12 million copies world-wide, was translated into 37 languages. and remains the top-selling environmental title ever published. It also became the driving force behind the emergence of the ecology and green movement in the 1970s, and the degrowth movement itself.

It was remarkably accurate, as Bill McKibben notes, and it's conclusion puts us exactly where we are today, facing increasing frequent climate related societal breakdowns that may soon become generalised.

McKibben also notes that Ursula von der Leyen directly referenced to the Meadows Report at her opening speech in Brussels: "Our predecessors", she had said, "chose to stick to the old shores and not lose sight of them. They did not change their growth paradigm but relied on oil. And the following generations have paid the price."

The Report, however, was ignored by the socialist left, with a few exceptions. Tony Benn's Alternative Economic Strategy of the 1980s, for example, made ever-faster economic growth its key demand. No wonder the trade unions and the Labour Party remain dominated by growth productivism today because they have never been challenged by the left.



William Morris – the outstanding environmentalist in the 19th century – had also gone unheeded when he raged against useless and unnecessary production. In his lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live', delivered in December 1884 in Hammersmith [Image above]– he raised the issue of how to live dignified and fulfilling lives without the need for mass produced commodities and consumerism, and what kind of future society could best provide such an approach.

What degrowth offers is a planned reduction of economic activity, within a different economic paradigm, and first and foremost in the rich countries of the Global North. Giorgos Kallis puts it this way in The Case for Degrowth (page viii): "The goal of degrowth is to purposefully slow things down in order to minimise harm to human beings and earth systems".

Jason Hickel in Less in More (page 29) –– tells us that degrowth is: "a planned reduction of excess energy and resource use in order to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe and equitable way".

The adoption of such an approach will need a mass movement involving everyone who is prepared to fight to save the planet on a progressive basis, including environmental movements, indigenous movements, peasant movements, farmers movement as well as trade unions and progressive political parties. It must demand that the big polluters pay for the damage they have done. This means heavily taxing fossil fuels in order to both cut emissions and to ensure that the polluters fund the transition to renewables as a part of an exit strategy from fossil fuel that redistributes wealth from the rich to the poor, and is capable of commanding popular

support. Such an approach must be the cornerstone of ecosocialism and an ecosocialist strategy designed to save the planet from ecological destruction and create a post-capitalist, ecologically sustainable, society for the future.

Alan Thornett, ecosocialist writer and activist, was a leading British trade unionist and car worker in the 60s and 70s

Written by Alan Thornett September 2013. Republished from https://www.ecosocialistdiscussion.com/2023/09/16/degrowth-a-remarkable-renaissance/ Alan Thornett's 'Facing the Apocalypse – Arguments for Ecosocialism' is published by Resistance Books and available for £15 here.

An introduction to degrowth: What is it and how does it

work?

This is the latest edition of the Scotonomics newsletter – click here to receive it free to your inbox every week.

As a global society, we must pursue policies to reduce material consumption and increase our wellbeing. This is the core of degrowth.It is exceptionalism that leads us to think that our economy, which grows by consuming natural resources, can grow forever. There must be a limit. That much is self-evident. However, even for those who agree that there is some future limit, many people think that we are a long way from that.

It is often a shock when you tell people that with an annual growth rate of only 3%, the economy doubles in only 24 years. By 2070, it would be four times bigger than it is today. Can we really look at our ecological problems and seriously picture an economy four times bigger?

2070 might seem too long a timeframe. So, let's look at 2050. There are approximately 9.7 billion people on the planet. If all of them were to live according to the living standards of a country like Scotland, assuming that 3% growth, our global resource use would be 15 times higher than it is today.

It is the bury-your-head-in-the-sand growth paradigm that is detached from reality.

Growth is not wellbeing

The mistake our society continues to make is to consider growth the same thing as wellbeing. The growth of an economy can increase and reduce wellbeing. Degrowth makes this connection implicit; a degrowth economy is one in which well-being increases.

Ecological economist Herman Daly talked about "economic and uneconomic growth", and he suggested that it is likely that economies in the global north became "uneconomic" at some point in the 1980s. Herman's argument focused on the depletion of non-renewable resources, the ecological consequences of overfilling waste sinks and an understanding that not all expenditure is beneficial. Spending £10 billion to deal with an oil spill would increase GDP. But it is hard to argue that it improves wellbeing.

The idea that growth is always good has become what George Monbiot (above) calls a "root metaphor". So deeply rooted is the idea that growth equals well-being that it frames our understanding and choices without us even being aware. Growth is now more than a simple process; it has become a powerful idea.

According to degrowth scholar Giorgos Kallis: "Growth is not only a material process. It is also a cultural, political and social process. Growth is an idea, produced, imagined and instituted. An idea that growth is natural, necessary and desirable."

Degrowth challenges that growth is natural, necessary or desirable.

Degrowth is a broad transformative process. It is a decrease in ecological damage and an increase in well-being.

In a degrowth economy, our human society reacts in a co-evolutionary way to its surroundings, in a way familiar to humans for around 99% of the last 100,000 years. In other words, we act more in tune with our environment.

Degrowth is selective and will involve increases in some things and decreases in others, such as less private and more public transport.

In a society guided by degrowth policies, we set limits on harmful activities and move our society to stay within specific and defined boundaries. Our life, not our economy,

is placed within the planet's biophysical boundaries. Once we return to within our current constraints, these boundaries can be seen as fluid, advanced or reduced by managing technology and other factors to create a steady state or "Goldilocks" economy.

Degrowth policies, in general, are highly redistributive. It is degrowth for the global North to allow space for "economic" growth, as defined by Herman Daly, for the global south.

Within global north nations like Scotland, degrowth starts with the wealthiest in society. The actions and lifestyles of the wealthiest degrow before anyone else, and there is a clear rationale for this. In the UK, the top 1% emit 10 times as much carbon yearly as the poorest do in two decades. Where else could you possibly start if you wanted to be effective?

There are no "non-reformest reforms" in a degrowth paradigm. However, a degrowth economy would be familiar enough to today's economy that we can use today's economic terms to make sense of a degrowth economy.

The ecological economist Tim Jackson, who describes himself more as a "post-growth" economist, wrote in his book Prosperity Without Growth: "The economy of tomorrow calls on us to revisit and reframe the concepts of productivity, profitability, asset ownership and control over the distribution of social surplus."

"It calls for a renegotiation of the role of the progressive state." This would need to happen in a degrowth economy.

The end game for degrowth is a much more balanced society and economy that prioritises planetary well-being. It is a post-capitalist world.

Common among those who support degrowth is the belief that degrowth is inevitable: We deal with the need to drastically

reduce throughput by design or by disaster. Degrowth uses the agency we have to solve the problems we have created.

In next week's article, we will take a closer look at degrowth policies.

Join us at 2.30pm on September 27 to discuss all of the topics we have discussed this month.

Republished from The National. https://www.thenational.scot/politics/23800528.introduction-degrowth-work/

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Picture: 'How We Might Live' – from the cover of How We Might Live: At Home with Jane and William Morris by Suzanne Fagence Cooper